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OLDTIME COMMENTS ON JOURNALISM

VOLUME I, NUMBER 6

EDITED BY FRANK LUTHER MOTT



*Benjamin Franklin*

ON NEWSPAPERS



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# OLDTIME COMMENTS ON JOURNALISM

VOLUME I, NUMBER 6

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## Preface

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, the universal genius of eighteenth century America, was, by training, occupation, and lifelong devotion, a printer. Apprenticed to the printing trade at the age of twelve, he entered the business for himself only a year after he came of age. Then in two decades — by the time he was forty-two — he made enough to retire and devote himself to the scientific studies he loved and to the service of his country. He was then just midway of his life's span and it is significant that in the forty-two years that remained to him, he never lost his strong interest in printing both as an art and as a business.

The story is told that when Franklin was Minister to France the famous printer Didot was showing him through his Paris plant, when the American suddenly threw off his coat, seized the lever of a press, and "pulled" an impression. "Do not be astonished, Sirs," explained Franklin; "it is my former business."

The impulse that produced this dramatic little episode was characteristic; and one could cite many instances of that attraction by which printing, in all its processes and phases, held Franklin as devotee throughout his life. And his last will and testament began: "I, Benjamin Franklin, Printer . . ."

Was Franklin similarly devoted to the business and profession of journalism? No; it must be admitted that he was not. He had certain connections with newspapers all his life—from childhood to old age—but the attachment he felt for journalism was different from that which he had for printing in its multiple aspects. In the eighteenth century, the newspaper (or, as it was commonly called, the *gazette*) was usually a rather casual by-product of a printing business. When a printer set up shop, he ordi-

narily began to issue a paper. Why not? He had the necessary type and press; he could do the editorial work himself, mostly with scissors and pastepot; and his journeyman and apprentice had to be kept busy in between other jobs of printing. Later, in the developing Trans-Alleghany country, papers came to be established for promotion or political purposes, and eventually the demand for news caused huge outlays for great journals; but in Colonial times probably not more than one out of ten of the gazettes was founded as anything more than a mere by-product of a printing office, and most of them were not only small sheets but paltry performances at that. Therefore Franklin could scarcely be expected to hold journalism in as high respect as that *ars artium conservatrix* represented by types and the printing press.

Franklin's chief newspaper connections were with the *New England Courant*, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and certain papers produced by young printers whom he had helped set up in business. He was ostensible editor and publisher of the *Courant* for a few months in 1723. He was editor and publisher of the *Gazette* 1729-1748, and then part-owner of that paper until its purchasers had paid him off, which took place in 1766. His connection with the gazettes of his former apprentices was but slight. Throughout his later life he occasionally contributed essays to American and English papers. His distinction as the first projector of an American magazine was so unimportant to him that he did not remember to mention that venture in his *Autobiography*.

These matters are set forth as an apology for the slimness of the present brochure. They serve, in other words, to explain why Benjamin Franklin, who was probably the



leading newspaper editor-publisher of Colonial America, had so little to say about newspapers. This small anthology could have been enlarged, to be sure, by observations on printing in its various phases, by commentary on book publishing, and by Franklinian pieces from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*; but it was thought best to keep the collection within the scope denoted by the title of our series, *Oldtime Comments on Journalism*.

Each item is prefaced by a headnote which is partly bibliographical, partly explanatory, and partly intended to show the essential modernism of Franklin and his comments.

Many thanks to Jack Young, manager of

the University of California Press, for help with copyright permissions; to Professor Anna S. Benjamin, for generous and erudite help with the Horatian epigraph; to the University of Missouri Library staff, and especially Mrs. Cornelia J. Caves, for help with microfilms.

And so the Press of the Crippled Turtle offers this modest pamphlet to the memory of a man who once disported himself with his own private press at Passy and who was himself a great pamphleteer, in the year of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth.

*Piscator paulus fecit.*

FRANK LUTHER MOTT

Columbia, Missouri

December 20, 1956

# *Benjamin Franklin*

## ON NEWSPAPERS

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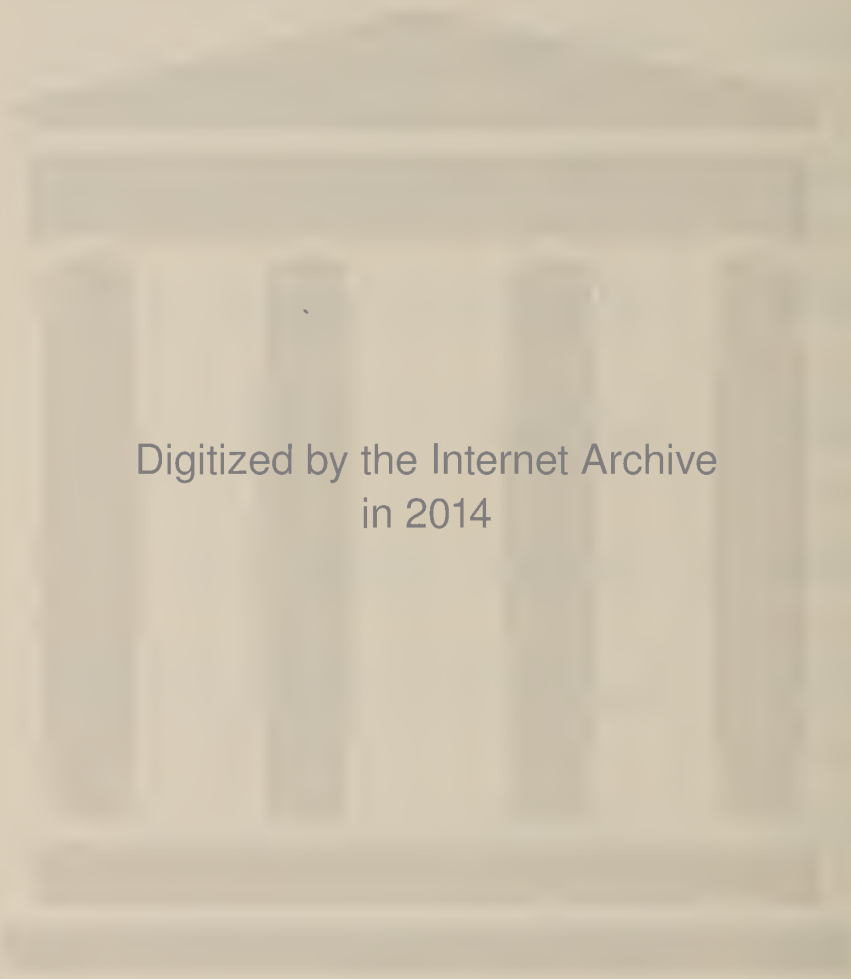
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## First Steps

[THE TEXT of the following extract from Franklin's *Autobiography* is that of the original manuscript. We are indebted to the University of California Press for permission to use this text, which appears in Max Farrand's *Benjamin Franklin's Memoirs: Parallel Text Edition* (Berkeley, 1949). The original manuscript is in the possession of the Huntington Library, Los Angeles.

The *New England Courant* belonged to the ten per cent of Colonial papers referred to in our Preface as something more than mere by-products of printing-offices; it was a propaganda journal attacking the Mather regime. It was filled with letters to the editor on that line, with social satire, and with series of essays — and with a minimum of news.]

MY BROTHER had in 1720 or 21, begun to print a Newspaper.<sup>1</sup> It Was the second that appear'd in America, & was called THE NEW ENGLAND COURANT. The only one before it, was THE BOSTON NEWS LETTER.<sup>2</sup> I remember his being dissuaded by some of his Friends from the Undertaking, as not likely to succeed, one Newspaper being in their Judgment enough for America. At this time 1771 there are not less than five & twenty.<sup>3</sup> He went on however with the Undertaking, and after having work'd in composing the Types & printing off the Sheets I was employ'd to carry the Papers thro' the Streets to the Customers. He had some ingenious Men among his Friends who amus'd themselves by writing little Pieces for this Paper, which gain'd it Credit, & made it more in Demand; and these Gentlemen often visited us.<sup>4</sup> Hearing their

<sup>1</sup> The first number appeared August 7, 1721. Benjamin had then been apprenticed to his brother about three years.

<sup>2</sup> This represents an error in memory on Franklin's part. The *Courant* was preceded by *Publick Occurrences*, the *Boston News-Letter*, the *Boston Gazette*, and the *American Weekly Mercury* of Philadelphia.

<sup>3</sup> To be exact, twenty-nine papers were in course of publication during some part of 1771.

<sup>4</sup> Among them were Dr. William Douglass, the Rev. Henry Harris, Thomas Fleet the printer, and John Checkley the apothecary. In the British Museum is what is supposed to be Benjamin Franklin's own file of the paper, with the names of the contributors written in. Contributions, as in all journals of the time, were almost all anonymous.



Conversations, and their Accounts of the Approbation their Papers were receiv'd with, I was excited to try my Hand among them. But being still a Boy, & suspecting that my Brother would object to printing any Thing of mine in his Paper if he knew it to be mine, I contriv'd to disguise my Hand, & writing an anonymous Paper I put it at Night under the Door of the Printing House. It was found in the Morning & communicated to his Writing Friends when they call'd in as usual. They read it, commented on it in my Hearing, and I had the exquisite Pleasure, of finding it met with their Approbation, and that in their different Guesses at the Author none were named but Men of some Character among us for Learning & Ingenuity. I suppose now that I was rather lucky in my Judges: And that perhaps they were not really so very good ones as I then esteem'd them. Encourag'd however by this, I wrote and convey'd in the same Way to the Press several more Papers, which were equally approv'd, and I kept my Secret till my small Fund of Sense for such Performances was pretty well exhausted, & then I discovered it; when I began to be considered a little more by my Brother's Acquaintance, and in a manner that did not quite please him, as he thought, probably with reason, that it tended to make me too vain. And perhaps this might be one Occasion of the Differences that we frequently had about this Time. Tho' a Brother, he considered himself as my Master, & me as his Apprentice; and accordingly expected the same Services from me as he would from another; while I thought he demean'd me too much in some he requir'd of me, who from a Brother expected more Indulgence. Our Disputes were often brought before our Father, and I fancy I was either generally in the right, or else a better Pleader, because the Judgment was generally in my favour: But my Brother was passionate & had often beaten me, which I took extreamly amiss; and thinking my Apprenticeship very tedious, I was continually wishing for some Opportunity of shortening it, which at length offered in a manner unexpected.

One of the Pieces in our News-Paper, on some political Point



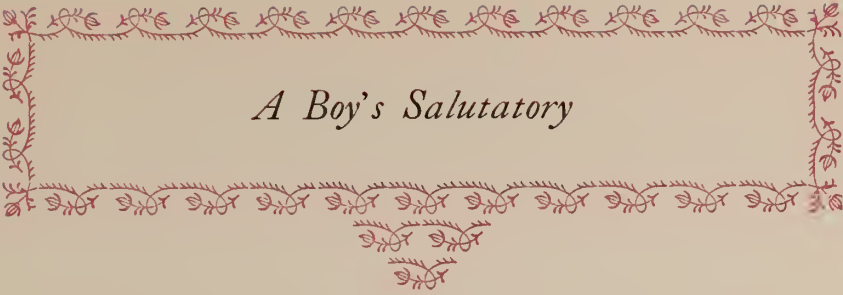
which I have now forgotten, gave Offense to the Assembly.<sup>5</sup> He was taken up, censur'd and imprison'd for a Month by the Speaker's Warrant, I suppose because he would not discover his Author. I too was taken up & examin'd before the Council; but tho' I did not give them any Satisfaction, they contented themselves with admonishing me, and dismiss'd me; considering me perhaps as an Apprentice who was bound to keep his Master's Secrets. During my Brother's Confinement, which I resented a good deal, notwithstanding our private Differences, I had the Management of the Paper, and I made bold to give our Rulers some Rubs in it, which my Brother took very kindly, while others began to consider me in an unfavourable Light, as a young Genius that had a Turn for Libelling & Satyr. My Brother's Discharge was accompany'd with an Order of the House, (a very odd one) *that James Franklin should no longer print the Paper called the New England Courant*.<sup>6</sup> There was a Consultation held in our Printing House among his Friends what he should do in this Case. Some propos'd to evade the Order by changing the Name of the Paper; but my Brother seeing Inconveniences in that, it was finally concluded on as a better Way, to let it be printed for the future under the Name of *Benjamin Franklin*. And to avoid the Censure of the Assembly that might fall on him, as still printing it by his Apprentice, the Contrivance was that my old Indenture should be return'd to me with a full Discharge on the Back of it, to be shown on Occasion; but to secure to him the Benefit of my Service I was to sign new Indentures for the Remainder of the Term, w<sup>ch</sup> were to be kept private. A very flimsy Scheme it was, but however it was immediately executed, and the Paper went on accordingly under my Name for several Months. At length a fresh Difference arising between my Brother and me, I took upon me to

<sup>5</sup> It was a sarcastic reference to Government's laxity in its pursuit of pirates, which had given rise to some whispering about collusion with them. This offended the Governor and Council and resulted in jailing the editor. By trial time, however, there were additional items in the indictment.

<sup>6</sup> More exactly: "That James Franklin be strictly forbidden to print or publish the *New-England Courant* or any Pamphlet or paper of the like Nature, Except it be first Supervised, by the Secretary of this Province."



assert my Freedom, presuming that he would not venture to produce the new Indentures. It was not fair in me to take this Advantage, and this I therefore reckon one of the first Errata of my Life: But the Unfairness of it weigh'd little with me, when under the Impressions of Resentment, for the Blows his Passion too often urg'd him to bestow upon me. Tho' he was otherwise not an ill-natured Man: Perhaps I was too saucy & provoking.



## *A Boy's Salutory*

[WHEN, by the "very flimsy scheme" explained in the foregoing excerpt from the *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin became *prima facie* editor and publisher of the *Courant*, he published his greetings to his readers in a little article. This was the custom in all the old papers when a new editor assumed the chair. Such a piece was often called "Salutory"; here it had no heading. The initial paragraph of this article appeared as a kind of headnote; then came the Latin epigraph; then a large factotum with an *L* in its center introducing the main essay.

This is a literal reprint from the *Courant* of February 11, 1723, except for the substitution of the short *s* where the long one is found in the original.

Precocious Ben, now seventeen years old, had profited much, it will be seen, from the imitations of Addison which he tells of practising so assiduously. This essay is full of affectations, but the author has the good sense to laugh at his own stylistic posing.

Many of the literary articles in the Colonial papers were modeled on the English

periodical essays as they appeared in the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, *Guardian*, *Rambler*, *Bee*, *Adventurer*, and other London weeklies. This was especially true of the *Courant's* essays, including Ben's youthful "Dogood Papers." It is probably not too much to say that the influence of the English periodical essay on the whole English-language press has been continuous since the days of Steele and Addison. It is surely obvious that we have modern prototypes of the essays of Addison, Steele, Johnson, Goldsmith, and others of their group in the contemporary syndicated columns of Hal Boyle, Inez Robb, Frederick Othman, Robert C. Ruark, and their pleasant ilk. The same types of content, purposes, moods persist through two hundred and fifty years.

Anyone who may wish to pursue this phase of Colonial journalism further will discover a pleasant guide in Elizabeth Christine Cook's *Literary Influences on Colonial Newspapers. 1704-1750* (New York, 1912).  
*al Newspapers. 1704-1750* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1912).]

THE LATE PUBLISHER of this Paper, finding so many Inconveniences would arise by his carrying the Manuscripts and publick News to be supervis'd by the Secretary,<sup>1</sup> as to render his carrying it on unprofitable, has intirely dropt the Undertaking. The present Publisher having received the following Piece, desires the Readers to accept of it as a Preface to what they may hereafter meet with in this paper.

<sup>1</sup> The Secretary of the Province (and the Council), designated to censor anything that James Franklin should write for publication.



*Non ego mordaci destrinxi Carmine quenquam  
Nulla venenato Litera onista Joco est.*<sup>2</sup>

Long has the Press groaned in bringing forth an hateful, but numerous Brood of Party Pamphlets, malicious Scribbles, and Billingsgate Ribaldry. The Rancour and bitterness it has unhappily infused into Men's minds, and to what a Degree it has sowed and leaven'd the Tempers of Persons formerly esteemed some of the most sweet and affable, is too well known here, to need any further Proof or Representation of the Matter.

No generous and impartial Person then can blame the present Undertaking, which is designed purely for the Diversion and Merriment of the Reader. Pieces of Pleasancy and Mirth have a secret Charm in them to allay the Heats and Tumours of our Spirits, and to make a man forget his restless Resentments. They have a strange Power to tune the harsh Disorders of the Soul, and reduce us to a serene and placid State of Mind.

The main Design of this Weekly Paper will be to entertain the Town with the most comical and diverting Incidents of Humane Life, which in so large a Place as *Boston*<sup>3</sup> will not fail of a universal Exemplification: Nor shall we be wanting to fill up these Papers with a grateful Interspersion of more serious Morals which may be drawn from the most ludicrous and odd Parts of Life.

As for the Author, that is the next Question. But tho' we profess ourselves ready to oblige the ingenious and courteous Reader with most Sorts of Intelligence, yet here we beg a Reserve. Nor will it be of any Manner of Advantage either to them or to the Writers,

<sup>2</sup> This quotation is from Ovid's *Tristes*, II, 563-566, lines 564-565 being omitted. The whole passage reads:

*Non ego mordaci destrinxi carmine quemquam  
nec meus illius crimina versus habet.  
Candidus a salibus suffisis felle refugi:  
nulla venenato littera mixta ioco est.*

It will be seen that the second line used (566) was corrupted by errors in copying or type-setting. A fairly literal translation:

*I have not injured anyone with biting verse,  
nor does my work concern anyone's crimes.  
I have been frank and have avoided wit steeped in gall:  
not a letter has been polluted by a poisoned jest.*

<sup>3</sup> Its population was between ten and fifteen thousand at this time. This seemed "large" to young Ben, and indeed to all Colonials; it was the largest town in the Colonies.



that their names should be published; and therefore in this Matter we desire the Favour of you to suffer us to hold our Tongues: Which tho' at this Time of Day it may sound like a very uncommon Request,<sup>4</sup> yet it proceeds from the very Hearts of your Humble Servants.

By this Time the Reader perceives that more than one are engaged in the present Undertaking. Yet there is one Person, an Inhabitant of this Town of *Boston*, whom we honour as a Doctor in the Chair,<sup>5</sup> or a perpetual Dictator. The Society had designed to present the Publick with his Effigies,<sup>6</sup> but that the Limner, to whom he was presented for a Draught of his Countenance, descryed (and this he is ready to offer up on Oath) Nineteen Features in his Face, more than ever he beheld in any Humane Visage before; which so raised the Price of his Picture, that our Master himself forbid the Extravagance of coming up to it. And then besides, the Limner objected to a Schism in his face, which splits it from his forehead in a strait Line down to his chin, in such sort, that Mr. Painter protests it is a double Face, and he'll have *Four Pounds* for the Pourtraiture. However, tho' this double Face has spoilt us of a pretty Picture, yet we all rejoiced to see old *Janus* in our Company.

There is no Man in *Boston* better qualified than old *Janus* for a *Couranteer*, or if you please, an *Observer*, being a Man of such remarkable *Opticks*, as to look two ways at once.

As for his Morals, he is a clearly Christian, as the Country Phrase expresses it. A Man of good Temper, courteous Deportment, sound Judgment; a mortal Hater of Nonsense, Foppery, Formality, and endless Ceremony.

As for his club,<sup>7</sup> they aim at no greater Happiness or Honour, than the Publick be made to know, that it is the utmost of their

<sup>4</sup> Anonymity was common; but "at this time of day," or under these circumstances, Franklin chooses to consider it a remarkable matter. It is part of his baiting of his censors.

<sup>5</sup> Doubtless Dr. William Douglass, a leading contributor to the *Courant* from the first.

<sup>6</sup> A picture of him. All good fun, but no Colonial paper ever printed a portrait.

<sup>7</sup> Loosely organized "clubs" of contributors were not uncommon in the eighteenth century as literary support for newspapers and magazines.



Ambition to attend upon and do all imaginable good Offices to good old *Janus* the Couranteer, who is and always will be the Readers humble Servant.

P. S. Gentle Readers, we design never to let a Paper pass without a Latin Motto if we can possibly pick one up, which carries a Charm in it to the Vulgar, and the learned admire the pleasure of Construing.<sup>8</sup> We should have obliged the World with a Greek scrap or two, but the Printer has no Types, and therefore we intreat the candid Reader not to impute the defect to our Ignorance, for our Doctor can say all the *Greek* Letters by heart.

<sup>8</sup> The construing of the motto given the present essay does indeed leave one to "admire," in the old sense of that word!



## Taking Over the Gazette

[FOR THE FOLLOWING extract from the *Autobiography* we again owe our thanks to the University of California Press for permission to use the original text as reproduced in the Farrand *Parallel Text Edition*. These paragraphs, and the preceding extract from the *Autobiography*, belong to the first part of the manuscript, written in 1771 while Franklin, taking a short vaca-

tion from his public duties in London, was the guest of the Bishop of St. Asaph's at Twyford, Hampshire.

The "spirited Remarks" about the controversy between the Massachusetts Assembly and Governor Burnet referred to in this passage made an article in which news was mixed with comment after the style of a columnist of the present day.]

GEORGE WEBB,<sup>1</sup> who had found a Female Friend that lent him wherewith to purchase his Time of Keimer, now came to offer himself as a Journeyman to us. We could not then employ him, but I foolishly let him know, as a Secret, that I soon intended to begin a Newspaper, & might then have Work for him. My Hopes of Success as I told him were founded on this, that the then only Newspaper, printed by Bradford<sup>2</sup> was a paltry thing, wretchedly manag'd, & no way entertaining; and yet was profitable to him. I therefore thought a good Paper could scarcely fail of good Encouragem<sup>t</sup>. I requested Webb not to mention it, but he told it to Keimer,<sup>3</sup> who immediately, to be beforehand with me, published Proposals for Printing one himself, on which Webb was to be employ'd. I resented this, and to counteract them, as I could not yet begin our

<sup>1</sup> Apparently unrelated to the John Webbe with whom Franklin later had a strikingly similar experience, in the course of which the former revealed to Bradford Franklin's plan to start a magazine.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bradford, who published the *American Weekly Mercury*.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Keimer, for whom Franklin worked when he first came to Philadelphia. It is possible that Franklin underestimated the eccentric old gentleman with the long white beard. Keimer was far from successful in Philadelphia, but he later carried on a printing business and newspaper in the Barbados for many years, and he apparently had a considerable understanding of contemporary intellectual movements.



Paper, I wrote several Pieces of Entertainment for Bradford's Paper, under the Title of the Busy Body which Brientnal<sup>4</sup> continu'd some Months. By this means the Attention of the Publick was fix'd on that Paper, & Keimer's Proposals which we burlesqu'd & ridicul'd, were disregarded. He began his Paper however, and after carrying it on three Quarters of a Year, with at most only 90 Subscribers, he offer'd it to me for a Trifle, & I having been ready some time to go on with it, took it in hand directly, and it prov'd in a few Years extreamly profitable to me.

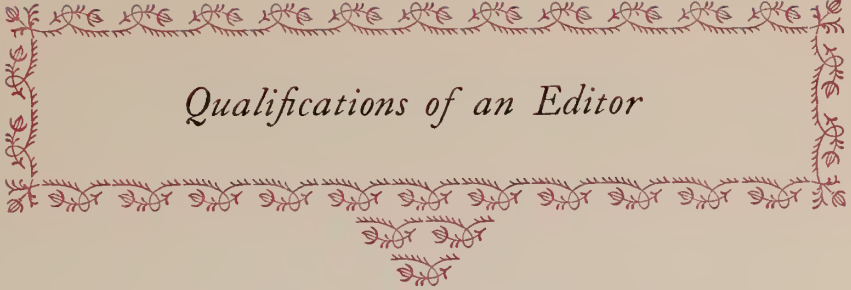
I perceive that I am apt to speak in the singular Number, though our Partnership still continu'd. The Reason may be, that in fact the whole Management of the Business lay upon me. Meredith<sup>5</sup> was no Compositor, a poor Pressman, & seldom sober. My Friends lamented my Connection with him, but I was to make the best of it.

Our first Papers made a quite different Appearance from any before in the Province, a better Type & better printed: but some spirited Remarks of my Writing on the Dispute then going on between Gov. Burnet and the Massachusetts Assembly,<sup>6</sup> struck the principal People, occasion'd the Paper & the Manager of it to be much talk'd of, & in a few Weeks brought them all to be our Subscribers. Their Example was follow'd by many, and our Number went on growing continually. This was one of the first good Effects of my having learnt a little to scribble. Another was, that the leading Men, seeing a News Paper now in the hands of one who could also handle a Pen thought it convenient to oblige & encourage me.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Breintnal, fellow member of Franklin's literary and philosophical club called "The Junto."

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Meredith was Franklin's partner in the printing business, 1728-1732. This included a share of the *Gazette*.

<sup>6</sup> This was one of the few outstanding editorial utterances of Franklin in his paper. It was occasioned by the death of William Burnet, royal Governor of Massachusetts. The article is reprinted in full in a footnote to the William Temple Franklin edition of the *Autobiography*.



## Qualifications of an Editor

[THIS is Franklin's salutatory to his readers when he and Meredith took over Samuel Keimer's *Universal Instructor in All Arts and Sciences: the Pennsylvania Gazette* on October 2, 1729. The preliminary part of that unwieldy title had been printed in a smaller type and was really a subtitle; Franklin discarded it immediately, throwing out at the same time the excerpts from an encyclopedia to which it referred, as well as the "instructive" Defoe serial.

This article as it appeared in the paper

carried no heading, and was set in italics. We have changed the italics here over to roman, except for a few words set in roman in the original, which we transpose to italics. Except for this change, and the short *s* where the long one is used in the original, this is a literal reprint.

The main part of this excerpt is often quoted today by more than one teacher of journalism in pointing out to students the scope of the training necessary for their profession.]

THE PENNSYLVANIA GAZETTE being now to be carry'd on by other Hands, the Reader may expect some Account of the Method we design to proceed in.

Upon a view of *Chambers's* great Dictionaries,<sup>1</sup> from whence were taken the Materials of the *Universal Instructor in all Arts and Sciences*, which usually made the First Part of this Paper, we find that besides their containing many Things abstruse or insignificant to us, it will probably be fifty Years before the Whole can be gone thro' in this Manner of Publication. There are likewise in those Books continual References from Things under one Letter of the Alphabet to those under another, which relate to the same Subject, and are necessary to explain and compleat it; these taken in their Turn may perhaps be Ten Years distant; and since it is likely that they who desire to acquaint themselves with any particular Art or

<sup>1</sup> Ephraim Chambers' *Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* was an encyclopedia in two volumes, published in London in 1728.



Science, would gladly have the whole before them in much less time, we believe our Readers will not think such a Method of communicating Knowledge to be a proper One.

However, tho' we do not intend to continue the Publication of those Dictionaries in a regular Alphabetical Method, as has hitherto been done; yet as several Things exhibited from them in the Course of these Papers, have been entertaining to such of the Curious, who never had and cannot have the Advantage of good Libraries; and as there are many Things still behind, which being in this Manner made generally known, may perhaps become of considerable Use, by giving such Hints to the excellent natural Genius's of our Country, as may contribute either to the Improvement of our present Manufactures, or towards the Invention of new Ones; we propose from Time to Time to communicate such particular Parts as appear to be of the most general Consequence.

As to the *Religious Courtship*,<sup>2</sup> Part of which has been retail'd to the Publick in these Papers, the Reader may be inform'd, that the whole Book will probably in a little Time be printed and bound up by itself; and those who approve of it, will doubtless be better pleas'd to have it entire, than in this broken interrupted Manner.

There are many who have long desired to see a good Newspaper in *Pennsylvania*; and we hope those Gentlemen who are able, will contribute towards making This such. We ask Assistance, because we are fully sensible, that to publish a good News-Paper is not so easy an Undertaking as many People imagine it to be. The Author of a *Gazette* (in the Opinion of the Learned) ought to be qualified with an extensive Acquaintance with Languages, a great Easiness and Command of Writing and Relating Things clearly and intelligibly, and in a few Words; he should be able to speak of War both by Land and Sea; be well acquainted with Geography, with

<sup>2</sup> This was the first work of fiction to appear serially in an American newspaper, and it is interesting to note that Franklin discontinued it in the middle of it. He was doubtless justified by the fact that it was about the dulllest thing that Daniel Defoe ever wrote — a pious epistolary romance. But Franklin's criticism of the "broken interrupted Manner" of serial publication still stands.



the History of the Time, with the several Interests of Princes, and States, the Secrets of Courts, and the Manners and Customs of all Nations. Men thus accomplish'd are very rare in this remote Part of the World; and it would be well if the Writer of these Papers could make up among his Friends what is wanting in himself.

Upon the Whole, we may assure the Publick, that as far as the Encouragement we meet will enable us, no Care and Pains shall be omitted, that may make the *Pennsylvania Gazette* as agreeable and useful an Entertainment as the Nature of the Thing will allow.



## *The Editor's Troubles*

[THE VERSION here given is a literal reprint from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of June 10, 1731, except for the substitution of the short *s* for the long form. Franklin provided no heading, but Smythe in his

edition entitled it "Apology for Printers."

Any modern editor who reads Franklin's plaintive "Apology" will find that it strikes many familiar notes. Newspapers and people have not changed so much after all.]

BEING frequently censur'd and condemn'd by different Persons for printing Things which they say ought not to be printed, I have sometimes thought it might be necessary to make a standing Apology<sup>1</sup> for my self, and publish it once a Year, to be read upon all Occasions of that Nature. Much Business has hitherto hindered the execution of this Design; but having very lately given extraordinary Offence by printing an Advertisement with a certain N. B. at the End of it, I find an Apology more particularly requisite at this Juncture, tho' it happens when I have not yet Leisure to write such a Thing in the proper Form, and can only in a loose manner throw those Considerations together which should have been the Substance of it.

I request all who are angry with me on the Account of printing things they don't like, calmly to consider these following Particulars:

1. That the Opinions of Men are almost as various as their Faces; an Observation general enough to become a common Proverb, *So many Men so many Minds*.

2. That the Business of Printing has chiefly to do with Mens

<sup>1</sup> "Apology" is here used in the older sense of explanation or justification, rather than that of expression of regret; *apologia*.



Opinions; most things that are printed tending to promote some, or oppose others.

3. That hence arises the peculiar Unhappiness of that Business, which other Callings are no way liable to; they who follow Printing being scarce able to do any thing in their way of getting a Living, which shall not probably give Offence to some, and perhaps to many; whereas the Smith, the Shoemaker, the Carpenter, or the Man of any other Trade, may work indifferently for People of all Persuasions, without offending any of them: and the Merchant may buy and sell with Jews, Turks, Hereticks and Infidels of all sorts, and get Money by every one of them, without giving Offence to the most orthodox, of any sort; or suffering the least Censure or Ill will on the Account from any Man whatever.

4. That it is as unreasonable in any one Man or Set of Men to expect to be pleas'd with every thing that is printed, as to think that nobody ought to be pleas'd but themselves.

5. Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play they chearfully serve all contending Writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the Question in Dispute.

6. Being thus continually employ'd in serving both Parties, Printers naturally acquire a vast Unconcernedness as to the right or wrong Opinions contain'd in what they print; regarding it only as the Matter of their daily labour: They print things full of Spleen and Animosity, with the utmost Calmness and Indifference, and without the least Ill-will to the Persons reflected on; who nevertheless unjustly think the Printer as much their Enemy as the Author, and join both together in their Resentment.

7. That it is unreasonable to imagine Printers approve of every thing they print, and to censure them on any particular thing accordingly; since in the way of their Business they print such great



variety of things opposite and contradictory. It is likewise as unreasonable what some assert, *That Printers ought not to print any Thing but what they approve*; since if all of that Business should make such a Resolution, and abide by it, an End would thereby be put to Free Writing, and the World would afterwards have nothing to read but what happen'd to be the Opinions of Printers.

8. That if all Printers were determin'd not to print any thing till they were sure it would offend no body, there would be very little printed.

9. That if they sometimes print vicious or silly things not worth reading, it may not be because they approve such things themselves, but because People are so viciously and corruptly educated that good things are not encouraged. I have known a very numerous Impression of *Robin Hood's Songs* go off in this Province at 2s. per Book, in less than a Twelvemonth; when a small Quantity of *David's Psalms* (an excellent Version) have lain upon my Hands above twice the Time.

10. That notwithstanding what might be urg'd in behalf of a Man's being allow'd to do in the Way of his Business whatever he is paid for, yet Printers do continually discourage the Printing of great Numbers of bad things, and stifle them in the Birth. I my self have constantly refused to print anything that might countenance Vice, or promote Immorality; tho' by complying in such Cases with the corrupt Taste of the Majority I might have got much Money. I have also refus'd to print such things as might do real Injury to any Person, how much soever I have been solicited, and tempted with Offers of Great Pay; and how much soever I have by refusing got the Ill-will of those who would have employ'd me. I have hitherto fallen under the Resentment of large Bodies of Men, for refusing absolutely to print any of their Party or Personal Reflections. In this Manner I have made my self many Enemies, and the constant Fatigue of denying is almost insupportable. But the Publick being unacquainted with all this, whenever the poor Printer happens



either through Ignorance or much Persuasion, to do any thing that is generally thought worthy of Blame, he meets with no more Friendship or Favour on the above Account, than if there were no Merit in't at all. Thus, as Waller says,

Poets lose half the Praise they would have got  
Were it but known what they discreetly blot;<sup>2</sup>

Yet are censur'd for every bad Line found in their Works with the utmost Severity.

I come now to the Particular Case of the N. B. above mention'd, about which there has been more Clamours against me, than ever before on any Account. — In the Hurry of other Business an Advertisement was brought to me to be printed; it signified that such a Ship lying at such a Wharff, would sail for *Barbadoes* in such a Time, and that Freighters and Passengers might agree with the Captain at such a Place; so far is what's common: But at the Bottom this odd Thing was added, N.B. *No Sea Hens nor Black Gowns will be admitted on any Terms*. I printed it, and receiv'd my Money; and the Advertisement was stuck up around the Town as usual. I had not so much Curiosity at that time as to enquire the Meaning of it, nor did I in the least imagine it would give so much Offence. Several good Men are very angry with me on this Occasion; they are pleas'd to say I have too much Sense to do such things ignorantly; that if they were Printers they would not have done such a thing on any Consideration; that it could proceed from nothing but my abundant Malice against Religion and the Clergy. They therefore declare they will not take any more of my Papers, nor have any farther Dealings with me; but will hinder me of all the Custom they can. All this is very hard!

I believe it had been better if I had refused to print the said Advertisement. However, 'tis done, and cannot be revok'd. I have only the following few Particulars to offer, some of them in my

<sup>2</sup> From Edmund Waller's well known poem, "Upon the Earl of Roscommon's Translation of Horace's *De Arte Poetica*."



behalf, by way of Mitigation, and some not much to the Purpose; but I desire none of them may be read when the Reader is not in a very good Humour.

1. That I really did it without the least Malice, and imagin'd the *N. B.* was plac'd there only to make the Advertisement star'd at, and more generally read.

2. That I never saw the Word *Sea-Hens* before in my Life; nor have I yet ask'd the meaning of it; and tho' I had certainly known that *Black Gowns* in that place signified the Clergy of the Church of *England*, yet I have that confidence in the generous good Temper of such of them as I know, as to be well satisfied such a trifling mention of their Habit gives them no Disturbance.

3. That most of the Clergy in this and the neighboring Provinces, are my Customers, and some of them my very good Friends; that I must be very malicious indeed, or very stupid, to print this thing for a small profit, if I had thought it would give them just Cause of Offence.

4. That if I had much Malice against the Clergy, and withal much Sense; 'tis strange I never write or talk against the Clergy myself. Some have observed that 'tis a fruitful Topic, and the easiest to be witty upon of all others; yet I appeal to the Publick that I am never guilty this way, and to all my Acquaintances as to my Conversation.

5. That if a Man of Sense had Malice enough to desire to injure the Clergy, this is the foolishhest Thing he could possibly contrive for that Purpose.

6. That I got Five Shillings by it.

7. That none who are angry with me would have given me so much to let it alone.

8. That if all the People of different Opinions in this Province would engage to give me as much for not printing things they don't like, as I can get by printing them, I should probably live a very easy Life; and if all Printers were everywhere so dealt by,



there would be very little printed.

9. That I am oblig'd to all who take my Paper, and am willing to think they do it out of meer Friendship. I only desire they would think the same when I deal with them. I thank those who leave off, that they have taken it so long. But I beg they would not endeavor to dissuade others, for that will look like Malice.

10. That 'tis impossible any Man should know what he would do if he was a Printer.

11. That notwithstanding the Rashness and Inexperience of Youth, which is most likely to be prevail'd with to do things that ought not to be done; yet I have avoided printing such Things as usually give Offense either to Church or State, more than any Printer that has followed the Business in this Province before.

12. And lastly, That I have printed above a Thousand Advertisements which made not the least mention of *Sea-Hens* or *Black Gowns*; and this being the first Offence, I have the more Reason to expect Forgiveness.

I take leave to conclude with an old Fable, which some of my Readers have heard before, and some have not.<sup>3</sup>

“A certain well-meaning Man and his Son, were travelling  
“ towards a Market Town, with an Ass which they had to sell. The  
“ Road was bad; and the old Man therefore rid, but the Son went  
“ afoot. The first Passenger they met, asked the Father if he was  
“ not ashamed to ride by himself, and suffer the poor lad to wade  
“ along thro' the Mire; this induced him to take up his Son be-  
“ hind him: He had not travelled far, when he met others, who  
“ said, they are two unmerciful Lubbers to get both on the Back of  
“ that poor Ass, in such a deep Road. Upon this the old Man gets  
“ off, and let his Son ride alone. The next they met called the Lad  
“ a graceless, rascally young Jackanapes, to ride in that Manner

<sup>3</sup> Franklin might have found this fable in any one of several collections. In one advertisement which appeared in the *Gazette* some years later, David Hall (Franklin's partner) listed among the offerings of his bookstore no less than six collections of fables: Aesop's (Croxall,) Dodsley's, Draper's, Moore's, Dryden's, and Gay's.



“ thro’ the Dirt, while his aged Father trudged along on Foot; and  
“ they said the old Man was a Fool, for suffering it. He then bid  
“ his Son come down, and walk with him, and they travell’d on  
“ leading the Ass by the Halter; ’till they met another Company,  
“ who called them a Couple of senseless Blockheads, for going both  
“ on Foot in such a dirty Way, when they had an empty Ass with  
“ them, which they might ride upon. The old Man could bear no  
“ longer; My Son, said he, it grieves me much that we cannot  
“ please all these People. Let me throw the Ass over the next  
“ Bridge, and be no further troubled with him.

Had the old Man been seen acting this last Resolution, he would probably have been called a Fool for troubling himself about the different Opinions of all that were pleas’d to find Fault with him: Therefore, tho’ I have a Temper almost as complying as his, I intend not to imitate him in this last Particular. I consider the Variety of Humors among Men, and despair of pleasing every Body; yet I shall not therefore leave off Printing. I shall continue my Business. I shall not burn my Press and melt my Letters.



## *Satire on Bad Foreign Correspondence*

[THIS PIECE, apparently written for a London paper but here reprinted from Albert Henry Smythe's *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, is obviously political in intent, being intended to poke fun at what some English papers were saying about American resources. It is included in this collection, however, because it satirizes generally the fabulous stories often published in the news-

papers about conditions and situations in foreign countries.

Doubtless foreign correspondence is, in general, far more competent today than it was in the eighteenth century; but there is still bad reporting from abroad in both English and American papers, some of which seems to deserve the severe strictures of this witty essay.]

Monday, May 20, 1765.

SIR,

In your Paper of Wednesday last, an ingenious Correspondent that calls himself THE SPECTATOR, and dates from *Pimlico*, under the Guise of Good Will to the News-writers, whom he calls an "useful Body of Men in this great City," has, in my Opinion, artfully attempted to turn them & their Works into Ridicule, wherein if he could succeed, great Injury might be done to the Public as well as to those good People.

Supposing, Sir, that the "*We hears*" they give us of this & t'other intended Voyage or Tour of this & t'other great Personage, were mere Inventions, yet they at least offer us an innocent Amusement while we read, and useful Matter of Conversation when we are dispos'd to converse.

Englishmen, Sir, are too apt to be silent when they have nothing to say; too apt to be sullen when they are silent; and, when they are sullen, to hang themselves. But, by these *We hears*, we are supplied with abundant funds of Discourse, we discuss the Motives



for such Voyages, the Probability of their being undertaken, and the Practicability of their Execution. Here we display our Judgment in Politics, our Knowledge of the Interests of Princes, and our Skill in Geography, and (if we have it) show our Dexterity moreover in Argumentation. In the mean time, the tedious Hour is kill'd, we go home pleased with the Applauses we have receiv'd from others, or at least with those we secretly give to ourselves: We sleep soundly, & live on, to the Comfort of our Families. But, Sir, I beg leave to say, that all the Articles of News that seem improbable are not mere Inventions. Some of them, I can assure you on the Faith of a Traveller, are serious Truths. And here, quitting Mr. Spectator of Pimlico, give me leave to instance the various numberless Accounts the Newswriters have given us, with so much honest Zeal for the welfare of *Poor Old England*, of the establishing Manufactures in the Colonies to the Prejudice of those of this Kingdom. It is objected by superficial Readers, who yet pretend to some Knowledge of those Countries, that such Establishments are not only improbable, but impossible, for that their sheep have but little Wooll, not in the whole sufficient for a Pair of Stockings a Year to each Inhabitant; and that, from the Universal Dearness of Labour among them, the Working of Iron and other Materials, except in some few coarse Instances, is impracticable to any Advantage.

Dear Sir, do not let us suffer ourselves to be amus'd with such groundless Objections. The very Tails of the American Sheep are so laden with Wooll, that each has a little Car or Waggon on four little Wheels, to support & keep it from trailing on the Ground.<sup>1</sup> Would they caulk their Ships, would they fill their Beds, would they even litter their Horses with Wooll, if it were not both plenty and cheap? And what signifies Dearness of Labour, when an English shilling passes for five and Twenty? Their engaging 300 Silk

<sup>1</sup> Professor Chester E. Jorgenson, who was my learned collaborator in a little book on Franklin issued a good many years ago, suggested that this whimsicality came to Franklin from Herodotus by way of Rabelais. (Mott and Jorgenson, *Benjamin Franklin*. American Writers Series. New York: American Book Company, 1936. Footnote 70.)



Throwsters here in one Week, for New York, was treated as a Fable, because, forsooth, they have “no Silk there to throw.” Those, who made this Objection, perhaps did not know, that at the same time the Agents from the King of Spain were at Quebec to contract for 1000 Pieces of Cannon to be made there for the Fortification of Mexico, and at N York engaging the annual Supply of woven Floor-Carpets for their West India Houses, other Agents from the Emperor of China were at Boston treating about an Exchange of raw Silk for Wooll, to be carried in Chinese Junks through the Straits of Magellan.

And yet all this is as certainly true, as the Account said to be from Quebec, in all the Papers of last Week, that the Inhabitants of Canada are making Preparations for a Cod and Whale Fishery this “Summer in the upper Lakes.” Ignorant People may object that the upper Lakes are fresh, and that Cod and Whale are Salt Water Fish: But let them know, Sir, that Cod, like other Fish when attack’d by their Enemies, fly into any Water where they can be safest; that Whales, when they have a mind to eat Cod, pursue them wherever they fly; and that the grand Leap of the Whale in that Chase up the Fall of Niagara is esteemed, by all who have seen it, as one of the finest Spectacles in Nature. Really, Sir, the World is grown too incredulous. It is like the Pendulum ever swinging from one Extream to another. Formerly every thing printed was believed, because it was in print. Now things seem to be disbelieved for just the very same Reason. Wise Men wonder at the present Growth of Infidelity. They should have consider’d, when they taught People to doubt the Authority of Newspapers and the Truth of Predictions in Almanacks, that the next Step might be a Disbelief in the well vouch’d Accts of Ghosts Witches, and Doubts even of the Truths of the Creed!

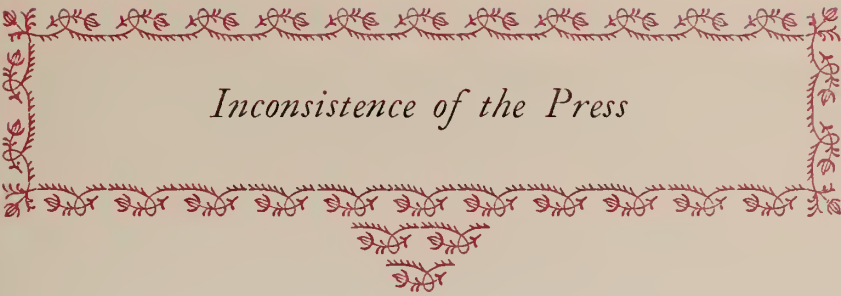
Thus much I thought it necessary to say in favour of an honest Set of Writers, whose comfortable Living depends on collecting & supplying the Printers with News at the small Price of Six-



pence an Article, and who always show their Regard to Truth, by contradicting in a subsequent Article such as are wrong,— for another Sixpence,— to the great Satisfaction & Improvement of us Coffee-house Students in History & Politics, and the infinite Advantage of all future Livies, Rapins, Robertsons, Humes, and McAulays,<sup>2</sup> who may be sincerely inclin'd to furnish the World with that *rara Avis*, a true History. I am, Sir, your humble Servant,

A TRAVELLER

<sup>2</sup> A list of historians named at random as they came to the author's mind: the Roman Titus Livius (Livy), the French Paul de Rapin de Thoyras, the Scottish William Robertson, the English David Hume, and the English Catharine Macaulay.



## Inconsistence of the Press

[THE FOLLOWING LETTER is also taken from Smythe's collected *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*. Like the preceding piece, it was probably found by Smythe in manuscript among the Franklin papers. The following article did not actually appear in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, for which it was intended and to whose editors it was addressed, as a search of the files discloses. Perhaps the old philosopher repented his captiousness and did not send the letter to the *Gazette*; perhaps the editors received it and never found room for it.

When Franklin wrote this he was eighty-

two years old, suffered much from gout and stone, and was often "miffy" (to use his own word) even at his own relatives. Small wonder that he should seem crochety in these criticisms.

And there was, as any reader of the old files knows, abundant reason for his criticism of scurrility in the press of the time, which was much given to outrageous personal attacks.

But in spite of gout and stone and the opium he had to take to quiet his pain, Franklin was still master of the sharp and witty phrase.]

MESSRS. HALL AND SELLERS,

I lately heard a remark, that on examination of *The Pennsylvania Gazette* for fifty years, from its commencement, it appeared, that, during that long period, scarce one libellous piece had ever appeared in it. This generally chaste conduct of your paper<sup>1</sup> is much to its reputation; for it has long been the opinion of sober, judicious people, that nothing is more likely to endanger the liberty of the press, than the abuse of that liberty, by employing it in personal accusation, detraction, and calumny. The excess some of our papers have been guilty of in this particular, have set this State in a bad light abroad, as appears by the following letter,<sup>2</sup> which I wish you

<sup>1</sup> It cannot be said that the *Pennsylvania Gazette* was wholly free from some of the kinds of attack specified later in this article.

<sup>2</sup> The device of the "attached letter" was not uncommon in the Colonial press. It was one of the techniques of anonymous letters to the editor. In this case, as often, it was employed to give what appeared to be an outside view of the Philadelphia press, which at this time (1788) included no less than ten papers.



to publish, not merely to show your own disapprobation of the practice, but as a caution to others of the profession throughout the United States. For I have seen a European newspaper, in which the editor, who had been charged with frequently calumniating the Americans, justifies himself by saying, "that he had published nothing disgraceful to us, which he had not taken from our own printed papers." I am, &c.

A.B.

"New York, March 30, 1788.

"Dear Friend,

"My Gout has at length left me, after five Months' painful Confinement. It afforded me, however, the Leisure to read, or hear read, all the Packets of your various Newspapers, which you so kindly sent for my Amusement.

"Mrs. W. has partaken of it; she likes to read the Advertisements; but she remarks some kind of Inconsistency in the announcing so many Diversions for almost every Evening of the Week, and such Quantities to be sold of expensive Superfluities, Fineries, and Luxuries *just imported*, in a Country, that at the same time fills its Papers with Complaints of *Hard Times*, and Want of Money. I tell her, that such Complaints are common to all Times and all Countries,<sup>3</sup> and were made even in Solomon's Times; when, as we are told, Silver was as plenty in Jerusalem as the Stones in the Street; and yet, even then, there were People who grumbled, so as to incur this Censure from that knowing Prince. *'Say not thou that the former Times were better than these; for thou dost not enquire rightly concerning that matter.'*<sup>4</sup>

"But the Inconsistence that strikes me the most is, that between the Name of your City, Philadelphia, (*Brotherly Love*,) and the Spirit of Rancour, Malice, and *Hatred* that breathes in its News

<sup>3</sup> But they are especially common in "hard times"; and in the 1780s, when there was little cash in the country, and the new nation was trying to emerge from a cloud of debt which affected nearly every inhabitant, the newspapers and magazines were full of lectures on thrift. Thus this observation on the purchase of needless luxuries is recognizable not merely as the voice of Poor Richard, but as that of the whole American press.

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes, vii, 10.



Papers. For I learn from those Papers, that your State is divided into Parties, that each Party ascribes all the public Operations of the other to vicious Motives; that they do not even suspect one another of the smallest Degree of Honesty; that the antifederalists are such, merely from the Fear of losing Power, Places, or Emoluments, which they have in Possession or in Expectation; that the Federalists are a set of *Conspirators*, who aim at establishing a Tyranny over the Persons and Property of their Countrymen, and to live in Splendor on the Plunder of the People. I learn, too, that your Justices of the Peace, tho' chosen by their Neighbours, make a villainous Trade of their Office, and promote Discord to augment Fees, and fleece their Electors; and that this would not be mended by placing the Choice in the Executive Council, who, with interested or party Views, are continually making as improper Appointments; witness a '*petty Fidler, Sycophant, and Scoundrel*,' appointed Judge of the Admiralty; '*an old Woman and Fomenter of Sedition*' to be another of the Judges, and '*a Jeffries*' Chief Justice, &c. &c.; with '*two Harpies*' the Comptroller and Naval Officers, to prey upon the Merchants and deprive them of their Property by Force of Arms, &c.<sup>5</sup>

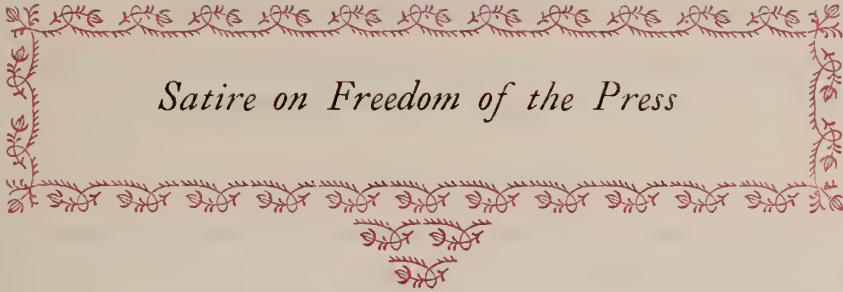
"I am inform'd also by these Papers, that your General Assembly, tho' the annual choice of the People, shows no Regard to their Rights, but from sinister Views or Ignorance makes Laws in direct Violation of the Constitution, to divest the Inhabitants of their Property and give it to Strangers and Intruders; and that the Council, either fearing the Resentment of their Constituents, or plotting to enslave them, had projected to disarm them, and given Orders for that purpose; and finally, that your President, the unanimous joint choice of the Council and Assembly, is '*an old Rogue*,' who gave his Assent to the federal Constitution merely to avoid refunding Money he had purloin'd from the United States.

"There is, indeed, a good deal of manifest *Inconsistency* in all

<sup>5</sup> These attacks, apparently taken directly from Philadelphia papers, are typical of the criticism of law and government which was appearing in the press of other states as well.



this, and yet a Stranger, seeing it in your own Prints, tho' he does not believe it all, may probably believe enough of it to conclude, that Pennsylvania is peopled by a Set of the most unprincipled, wicked, rascally, and quarrelsome Scoundrels upon the Face of the Globe. I have sometimes, indeed, suspected, that those Papers are the Manufacture of foreign Enemies among you, who write with a view of disgracing your Country, and making you appear contemptible and detestable all the World over; but then I wonder at the Indiscretion of your Printers in publishing such Writings! There is, however, one of your *Inconsistencies* that consoles me a little, which is, that tho' *living*, you give one another the characters of Devils; *dead*, you are all Angels! It is delightful, when any of you die, to read what good Husbands, good Fathers, good Friends, good Citizens, and good Christians you were, concluding with a Scrap of Poetry that places you, with certainty, every one in Heaven. So that I think Pennsylvania a good country *to dye in*, though a very bad one to *live in*."



## *Satire on Freedom of the Press*

[THIS BAGATELLE was called forth by the current campaign for a state libel law in Pennsylvania. Other states were discussing and passing defamatory libel acts, and it was such a proposal for his state that Franklin was discussing. Note that on the larger question Franklin is now, as always, clear: "If by the *Liberty of the Press* were understood merely the Liberty of discussing the Propriety of Public Measures and political opinions, let us have as much of it as you please."

Nevertheless, Robert Goodloe Harper, then a member of Congress from South Carolina, quoted this satire when he argued

in favor of the federal Sedition Act in the summer of 1798. (See *Debates and Proc. in the Congress of the U.S.*, 5th Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 2166-2168.) Satire is always double-edged, and humorless persons will quote it seriously.

This essay first appeared in a pamphlet sometime in the spring of 1789, under the title *An Account of the Supremest Court of Judicature in Pennsylvania, viz. The Court of the Press*. It was republished in the *Federal Gazette* September 12, 1789, and later in Albert Henry Smythe's *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. X, pp. 36-40, whence it is here reprinted.]

### *Power of this Court.*

IT MAY RECEIVE and promulgate accusations of all kinds, against all persons and characters among the citizens of the State, and even against all inferior courts; and may judge, sentence, and condemn to infamy, not only private individuals, but public bodies, &c., with or without inquiry or hearing, *at the court's discretion*.

### *In whose Favour and for whose Emolument this Court is established.*

In favour of about one citizen in five hundred, who, by education or practice in scribbling, has acquired a tolerable style as to grammar and construction, so as to bear printing; or who is possessed of a press and a few types. This five hundredth part of the citizens have the privilege of accusing and abusing the other four



hundred and ninety-nine parts at their pleasure; or they may hire out their pens and press to others for that purpose.

*Practice of the Court.*

It is not governed by any of the rules of common courts of law. The accused is allowed no grand jury to judge of the truth of the accusation before it is publicly made, nor is the Name of the Accuser made known to him, nor has he an Opportunity of confronting the Witnesses against him; for they are kept in the dark, as in the Spanish Court of Inquisition. Nor is there any petty Jury of his Peers, sworn to try the Truth of the Charges. The Proceedings are also sometimes so rapid, that an honest, good Citizen may find himself suddenly and unexpectedly accus'd, and in the same Morning judg'd and condemn'd, and sentence pronounc'd against him, that he is a *Rogue* and a *Villain*. Yet, if an officer of this court receives the slightest check for misconduct in this his office, he claims immediately the rights of a free citizen by the constitution, and demands to know his accuser, to confront the witnesses, and to have a fair trial by a jury of his peers.

*The Foundation of its Authority.*

It is said to be founded on an Article of the Constitution of the State, which establishes *the Liberty of the Press*; a Liberty which every Pennsylvanian would fight and die for; tho' few of us, I believe, have distinct Ideas of its Nature and Extent. It seems indeed somewhat like the *Liberty of the Press* that Felons have, by the Common Law of England, before Conviction, that is, to be *press'd* to death or hanged. If by the *Liberty of the Press* were understood merely the Liberty of discussing the Propriety of Public Measures and political opinions, let us have as much of it as you please: But if it means the Liberty of affronting, calumniating, and defaming one another, I, for my part, own myself willing to part with my Share of it when our Legislators shall please so to alter the Law, and shall



cheerfully consent to exchange my *Liberty* of Abusing others for the *Privilege* of not being abus'd myself.<sup>1</sup>

*By whom this Court is commissioned or constituted.*

It is not by any Commission from the Supreme Executive Council, who might previously judge of the Abilities, Integrity, Knowledge, &c. of the Persons to be appointed to this great Trust, of deciding upon the Characters and good Fame of the Citizens; for this Court is above that Council, and may *accuse, judge, and condemn* it, at pleasure. Nor is it hereditary, as in the Court of *dernier Resort*, in the Peerage of England. But any Man who can procure Pen, Ink, and Paper, with a Press, and a huge pair of BLACKING Balls,<sup>2</sup> may commissionate himself; and his court is immediately established in the plenary Possession and exercise of its rights. For, if you make the least complaint of the *judge's* conduct, he daubs his blacking balls in your face wherever he meets you; and, besides tearing your private character to flitters, marks you out for the odium of the public, as an *enemy to the liberty of the press*.

*Of the natural Support of these Courts.*

Their support is founded in the depravity of such minds, as have not been mended by religion, nor improved by good education;

“There is a Lust in Man no Charm can tame,  
Of loudly publishing his Neighbour's Shame.”

“On Eagle's Wings immortal Scandals fly,  
While virtuous Actions are but born and die.”

DRYDEN.

Whoever feels pain in hearing a good character of his neighbour, will feel a pleasure in the reverse. And of those who, despairing to rise into distinction by their virtues, are happy if others can be depressed to a level with themselves, there are a number sufficient

<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this attitude on the part of the public and of responsible newspapermen which has resulted in protections against such abuse now embedded in the libel laws.

<sup>2</sup> This is really a pun, the “blacking balls” in question being the inking balls used to apply ink to the type in the forms when on the press.



in every great town to maintain one of these courts by their subscriptions. A shrewd observer once said, that, in walking the streets in a slippery morning, one might see where the good-natured people lived by the ashes thrown on the ice before their doors; probably he would have formed a different conjecture of the temper of those whom he might find engaged in such a subscription.

*Of the Checks proper to be established against  
the Abuse of Power in these Courts.*

Hitherto there are none. But since so much has been written and published on the federal Constitution, and the necessity of checks in all other parts of good government has been so clearly and learnedly explained, I find myself so far enlightened as to suspect some check may be proper in this part also; but I have been at a loss to imagine any that may not be construed an infringement of the sacred *liberty of the press*. At length, however, I think I have found one that, instead of diminishing general liberty, shall augment it; which is, by restoring to the people a species of liberty, of which they have been deprived by our laws, I mean the *liberty of the cudgel*. In the rude state of society prior to the existence of laws, if one man gave another ill language, the affronted person would return it by a box on the ear, and, if repeated, by a good drubbing; and this without offending against any law. But now the right of making such returns is denied, and they are punished as breaches of the peace; while the right of abusing seems to remain in full force, the laws made against it being rendered ineffectual by the *liberty of the press*.

My proposal then is, to leave the liberty of the press untouched, to be exercised in its full extent, force, and vigor; but to permit the *liberty of the cudgel* to go with it *pari passu*. Thus, my fellow-citizens, if an impudent writer attacks your reputation, dearer to you perhaps than your life, and puts his name to the charge, you may go to him as openly and break his head. If he conceals himself behind the printer, and you can nevertheless discover who he is, you may in



like manner way-lay him in the night, attack him behind, and give him a good drubbing. Thus far goes my project as to *private* resentment and retribution. But if the public should ever happen to be affronted, *as it ought to be*, with the conduct of such writers, I would not advise proceeding immediately to these extremities; but that we should in moderation content ourselves with tarring and feathering, and tossing them in a blanket.

If, however, it should be thought that this proposal of mine may disturb the public peace, I would then humbly recommend to our legislators to take up the consideration of both liberties, that of the *press*, and that of the *cudgel*, and by an explicit law mark their extent and limits; and, at the same time that they secure the person of a citizen from *assaults*, they would likewise provide for the security of his *reputation*.



## *Functions of the Newspaper*

[THESE COMMENTS on (a) the educational and cultural value Franklin tried to give his newspaper, and (b) his battle against scurrility in the press, are taken from the third part of the original manuscript of the *Autobiography*, which was written in Philadelphia less than two years before his death. It is reproduced, by permission, from the *Parallel Text Edition* (University

of California Press). Whereas Part I was written more or less casually for his family, the somewhat more formal style of the later Parts seems to show that Franklin knew he was writing therein for posterity.

These wise observations may fittingly end our little anthology of Benjamin Franklin's remarks on newspapers and the press in general.]

I CONSIDER'D my Newspaper also as another Means of Communicating Instruction, & in that View frequently reprinted in it Extracts from the Spectator and other moral Writers, and sometimes publish'd little Pieces of my own which had been first compos'd for Reading in our Junto. Of these are a socratic Dialogue tending to prove, that, whatever might be his Parts and Abilities, a vicious Man could not properly be called a Man of Sense.<sup>1</sup> And a Discourse on Self denial, showing that Virtue was not secure, till its Practice became a Habitude, & was free from the Opposition of contrary Inclinations.<sup>2</sup> These may be found in the Papers about the beginning of 1735. In the Conduct of my Newspaper I carefully excluded all Libelling and Personal Abuse, which is of late Years become so disgraceful to our Country. Whenever I was solicited to insert any thing of that kind, and the Writers pleaded as they generally did, the Liberty of the Press, and that a Newspaper was like a Stage Coach in which any one who would pay had a Right to a Place,

<sup>1</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 23, 1730.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, July 9, 1730.



my Answer was, that I would print the Piece separately if desired, and the Author might have as many Copies as he pleased to distribute himself, but that I would not take upon me to spread his Detraction, and that having contracted with my Subscribers to furnish them with what might be either useful or entertaining, I could not fill their Papers with private Altercation in which they had no Concern without doing them manifest Injustice. Now many of our Printers make no scruple of gratifying the Malice of Individuals by false Accusations of the fairest Characters among ourselves, augmenting Animosity even to the producing of Duels, and are moreover so indiscreet as to print scurrilous Reflections on the Government of neighbouring States, and even on the Conduct of our best national Allies, which may be attended with the most pernicious Consequences. These Things I mention as a Caution to young Printers, & that they may be encouraged not to pollute their Presses and disgrace their Profession by such infamous Practices, but refuse steadily; as they may see by my Example, that such a Course of Conduct will not on the whole be injurious to their Interests.

*Benjamin Franklin on Newspapers*, sixth and last number of Vol. I, *Oldtime Comments on Journalism* series, is set in faithful reproductions of the letter by William Caslon that Benjamin Franklin admired so much. The 8-, 10-, and 14-point sizes are Caslon Oldface (Mergenthaler Linotype Company), and the display sizes are Caslon 471 (American Type Founders Company). The flowers, too, are Caslon copies. Two hundred and forty copies of this number have been printed. This is Number 213



